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THE POSITION OF THE NEGRO FARMER AND HIS COMMUNITY IN THE DYNAMICS
OF SOUTHEASTERN AGRICULTURE

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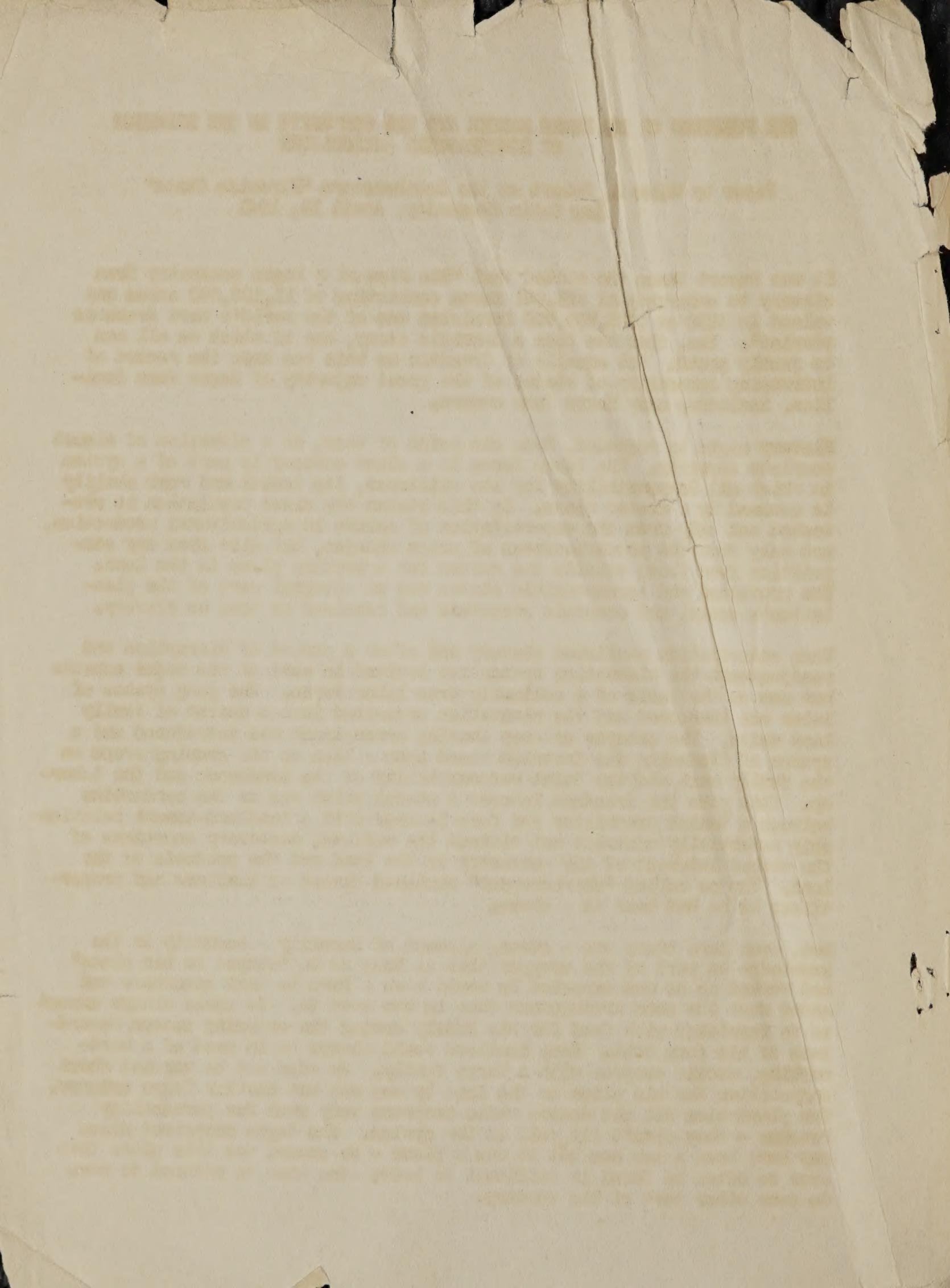
Paper by Giles A. Hubert at the Southeastern "Fireside Chats"
Log Cabin Community, April 19, 1941

It was Rupert Vance who stated that "the rise of a Negro peasantry from slavery to ownership of 181,061 farms consisting of 11,198,893 acres and valued in 1930 at \$228,709,700 furnishes one of the world's most dramatic stories". Yes, this has been a dramatic story, one of which we all can be justly proud. But equally as dramatic as this has been the record of increasing insecurity of status of the great majority of Negro farm families, including many Negro farm owners.

Slavery might be regarded, from one point of view, as a situation of almost complete security. The labor force in a slave economy is part of a system in which all responsibility for its existence, its health and work ability is assumed by a master class. In this status the slave population is protected not only from the uncertainties of nature in agricultural production, not only from the precariousness of price changes, but also from any competition from those outside the system for a working place in the land. The protected and irresponsible status was an integral part of the plantation's social and economic structure and remained as long as slavery.

When emancipation abolished slavery and after a period of disruption and readjustment the plantation system was revived in most of its major aspects but now on the basis of a nominally free labor force. The gang system of labor was abandoned and the plantation organized into a system of family land units. The metayer or crop sharing arrangement was introduced and a system of financing was invented based upon a lien on the growing crops on the family unit and the joint responsibility of the landowner and the laborer. This gave the freedman laborer a status which was on the borderline between a tenant proprietor and farm laborer with a landlord-tenant relationship essentially manorial but without the medieval customary sanctions of the vested interest of the peasantry in the land and the products of the land. The so called "sharecropper" remained almost as landless and propertiless as he had been as a slave.

But, even here there was a strong element of security - security in the knowledge on part of the cropper that as long as he "stayed in his place" and worked as he was expected he would have a farm to work somewhere and under much the same arrangement that he was used to. He could always expect to be furnished with food for his family during the cropping season regardless of his farm debt. Some landlord would always be in need of a hard-working, docile cropper with a large family. He need not be worried about competition for his place on the land by any one but another Negro cropper. The plantation did not desire white croppers very much for personality reasons - they didn't fit well in the system. The Negro croppers' place may have been a low one but it was a place - so secure was this place that ever so often he found it difficult to leave even when he planned to move to some other part of the country.



The Negro cropper on the Southeastern plantation was safe as long as the plantation system itself was secure. But, forces have been at work, some over a long period extending back into the era of slavery, which have rendered the position of the plantation insecure and in many places have brought about the complete collapse and passing of the plantation economy. Over a long period of years the clean row cultivation of a single crop cotton and tobacco culture has robbed the soil continually, reducing constantly the vital resource upon which the plantation economy was built. Over a long period and for a variety of reasons which cannot be discussed here, the South has been losing its position in the world cotton market and the Southeast particularly has been increasingly at a competitive disadvantage with newer and expanding cotton areas. The boll-weevil reached the Southeast with a "blitz-krieg" at a time when the once proud plantation was already tottering on legs weakened by its own improvidence. The depression of the thirties was a knock-out blow which completely paralized the agricultural economy of the Southeast.

Only the most efficient plantation units on the most favored lands have been able to survive this series of onslaughts. Many plantations have ceased to operate and others have made innovations in their organization and structural set-up which threaten the very nature of plantation organization itself.

II.

These dynamics have had a profound effect upon the status and security of thousands of the Negro agricultural workers in the Southeast. In the first place, the long time trend toward increased economic instability and precariousness of the plantation has led landlords in many areas of the Southeast to shift more and more of the burden and the risk of management onto the worker. Where once the worker was a cropper, he now becomes a share tenant and a renter. This has been especially true in the older and more worn out and eroded areas of the region. Thus, in areas where the supposedly more efficient plantation organization has failed, the worker was told to shift for himself in the matter of securing workstock and agricultural equipment and in the matter of securing financing for annual production operations. With agricultural knowledge limited only to what he has learned as sharecropper in a farming system which has failed, he now is given the wonderful opportunity of becoming an enterprising proprietor on lands long since denuded of their virgin fertility. In return for this doubtful favor the landlords now reduce their rental expectations from 1/2 of the crop to 1/4 or to a cash or standing rent fixed by contract. Many former tenants and croppers have been encouraged to buy these worn out lands and set out for themselves on the road to security and prosperity. With worn out lands, without ability to provide themselves with adequate workstock and equipment, with an archaic agricultural training, which Dr. Alexander has called "a set of inherited motions", the new peasantry steps out to compete in a competitive agriculture bereft of the security and protection of the plantation structure but with all of its straggling legacy.

On those plantation units which have survived, adjustments are underway which either modify slightly the farming operations and displace a few

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families or which completely change the character of the farm organization with displacement of most of the worker families.

Adjustment of farm organization in conformity with the cotton reduction and soil conservation program of the Agricultural Adjustment Administration has resulted directly or indirectly in displacement of thousands of plantation croppers. Studies by Hoffsommer, Smith and others have indicated this to be true, but measurement of the total amount of displacement due specifically to this cause is difficult.

Tractor farming, which is progressing at a rapid rate in the Delta and Western cotton areas, has not, as yet, seriously affected farm organization and labor in the Southeastern areas. More important has been the use of whole row cultivators with two mules to the man as opposed to the traditional one-man-one-mule half row cultivation practice.

The most drastic and dramatic change in farm organization affecting Negro agricultural workers has been the relatively rapid shift from cotton production on large farms in the Alabama - Mississippi Black Prairie. (The story of this metamorphosis is told in a dramatic article by George Stoney in a recent issue of Survey Graphic). Thousands of families once secure on cotton plantations (before the boll-weevil era) have been displaced by dairy and white faced beef cattle. The case of this area is indicative of the type of change which can occur to a farming area over a relatively short period of time seriously affecting the competitive position of the farming families within it. Within a single generation green grass has taken the place of cotton and "white faces" have displaced "black faces".

Not much less dramatic has been the lot of the former sea-island coast area of the Carolinas, Georgia and Florida. Completely emaciated by the boll-weevil invasion this area has become the home of a more or less stranded population of tiny farm owners and tenants eking out a bare subsistence on their little land parcels which no one else seems to desire. The development of rapid transportation between these areas and the northeastern population centers offered the prospect of truck farming - but this opportunity has found a population unprepared technically and unorganized economically to take advantage of it. The precariousness of truck farming and produce markets and prices has consequently meant discouragement and frustration more often than it has helped this group.

Many other areas of the old cotton belt, completely worn out by soil mining and erosion have been completely abandoned and appear destined to return permanently to forests. This is being encouraged prescipitously by the government in some places with very little regard to what happens to the families previously occupying the land. It is probably to be admitted that considerable land in the Southeastern states never will be good for agriculture again. Some of the land probably should never have been put into cultivation. Against this, however, we must face the fact that you cannot take care of an increasing population with a forest economy.

The net result of this whole complex of factors has been a continual decrease in the number of family workers engaged in agriculture in the Southeastern cotton area over a long period of time. According to figures prepared by

the Works Progress Administration there was in this area a net decrease of 340,000 family agricultural workers for the 27 year period from 1909 to 1936. It is interesting to note that there was no corresponding loss in hired workers on farms in the cotton Southeast. In fact during the latter 1930's, while the number of family workers engaged in agriculture continued to decrease, the number of hired workers actually increased. This represents actual displacement from agriculture which would result in migration over and above that which might be designated as resulting from normal surplus of rural population. It also indicates a loss of status of many tenants and croppers in recent years who have dropped to the position of hired laborers - a status which all too often has meant that of casual season laborers.

On the other hand it must be remembered that the Southeast has the highest rate of natural increase in rural population in the country. It is true that the rate of natural increase (15) for rural whites is higher than that for Negroes (10). But, it is high for both groups and means an immense pressure of population on the land.

An attempt has been made to show that while on the one hand we can point with considerable pride to what progress Negro farmers have made in agriculture in rising from the position of the slave to that of proprietorship, either as independent tenants or owners, on the other hand we must note with considerable concern that this has been attended by assumption of the burden and risk of proprietorship in a situation of increasing insecurity. What in some situations might have represented real progress in economic and social stability has meant all too often disillusionment, disruption, the uprooting of people from the land they occupied and general loss of competitive status.

III.

The usual outlet to population pressure is migration and we have witnessed a large scale movement for rural people from the Southeast into urban areas both South and North. Odum has shown a net loss of 1,840,000 Negroes through migration by 1930. This in part represents industrial absorption of surplus rural population and is part of a general trend in our industrial civilization. On the other hand, it has been shown that part of this has been the result of failure and abandonment.

In recent years, however, the tide of rural-urban migration in this country has slowed down and for a few years during the depth of depression there was a net migration back to rural areas. This leads us to examine what the situation is for Negroes in urban areas and the possibilities of future absorption of surplus and distressed rural Negroes.

In periods of rapid industrial expansion such as we saw in the World War and post war period, and as we are experiencing now, there is a high demand for labor. The role of the Negro migrant, along with other migrants, has been to meet this expansion in the demand for labor. When the industrial boom is over these workers, last added to the industrial labor force, are the first to be retired from it. It has often been pointed out that of all

workers, the Negro is the last to be hired where labor is needed and first to be fired when labor is not needed.

A WPA study shows that, in 1934, of all Negro households in Atlanta 49 percent were on relief; in Chicago 51 percent, in New York 52 percent, in Washington 59 percent. This, of course, was in the depth of the depression.

We received some preliminary figures the other day on the unemployment situation in certain cities at the time the 1940 census was taken. This we could regard as a year of fairly rapid industrial expansion, at least above average. Of the entire Negro labor force in Chicago 35 percent were unemployed or on work relief, in Detroit 32 percent, in St. Louis 31 percent, in Birmingham 22 percent. In four large northern cities 19 percent of the employable Negroes were actually looking for jobs (See tables).

If industrial expansion caused by the present defense boom should absorb all Negroes now on public emergency or relief work, between 13 and 19 percent of the able bodied Negroes of working age in cities would still be looking for jobs. When we reflect that they are likely to be the last employed, there is little need for jubilance. What is the outlook for these people when the defense expansion is over?

From this picture we have to conclude that the outlook for Negroes in cities is no more pleasing than that for agriculture. This simply means that during our generation we cannot expect to receive any major relief in Southeastern agriculture by migration of Negroes in large numbers to urban areas - not enough to relieve the pressure of population on the land. We must, it appears, prepare to think for a long time in terms of taking care of more of our people, rather than less, on the now worn out and eroded lands of the Southeast. We must think of a satisfying life for these even where possibilities appear to be but meager.

IV.

This involves, in part, the development of a way of thinking which would be common ground for our agricultural leadership or at least for a significant group of that leadership. It is hoped that the discussion of this conference can be held with this general purpose in view. As a beginning, I have taken the liberty to excerpt an article entitled "Beyond Economics" by M. L. Wilson, formerly Under-Secretary of Agriculture and now head of the Agricultural Extension Service. I wish to read this as an example of a way of thinking which the people of the Southeast might well consider. It is a way of thinking which we who aspire to leadership of a large segment of the population concerned might well consider.

"There are in one sense two polar extremes of thought in respect to the direction agricultural development should follow in the future. The first extreme school of thought would follow the line set by sheer technological and production efficiency. Whether they are laissez faire theorists or socialistic theorists, the exponents of this point of view advocates agricultural development along lines for which technological efficiency is almost the sole criterion. If

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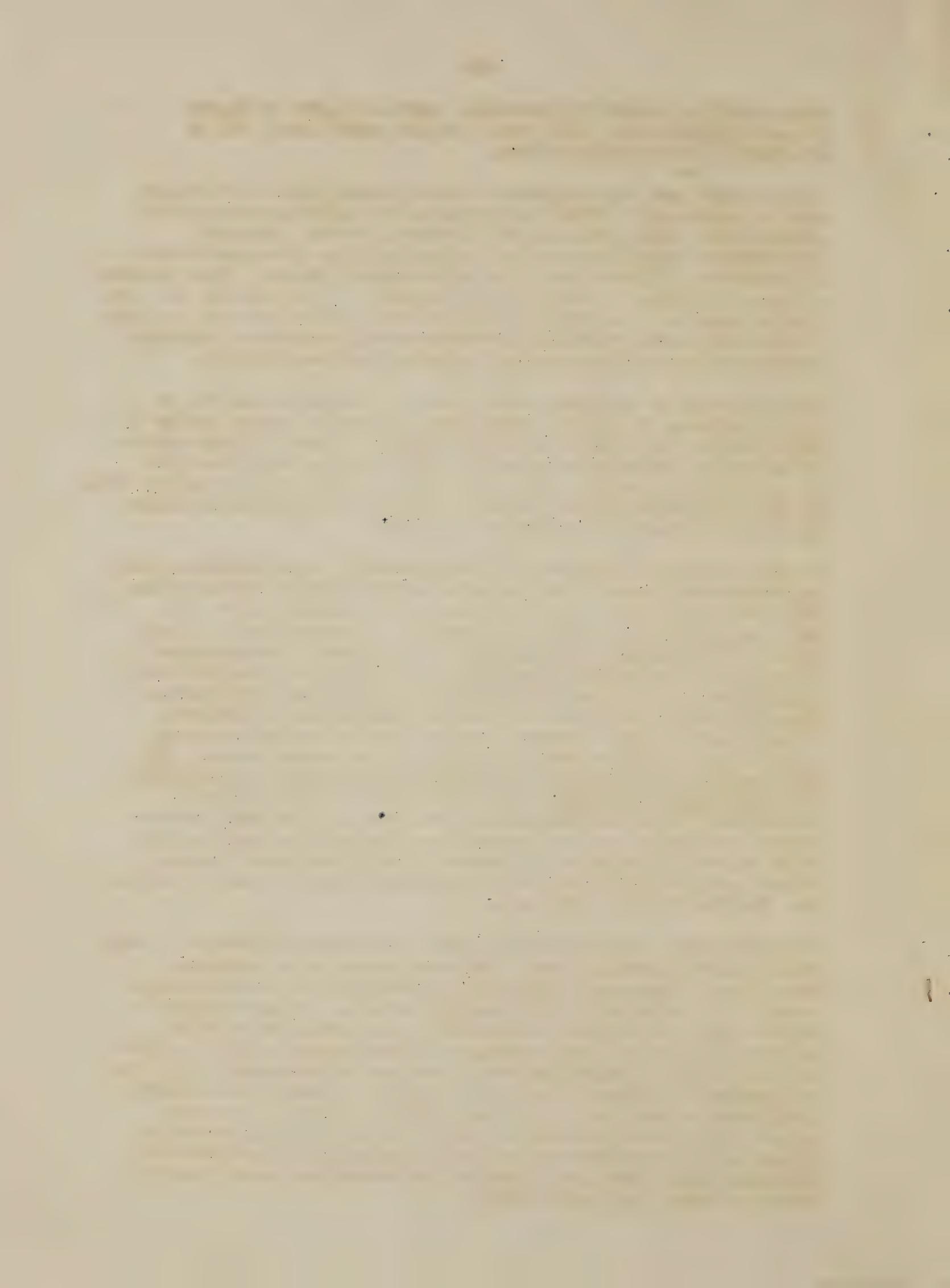
costs could be lowered by production units of 1,000 or 10,000 or even 100,000 acres, they feel that such units should be an important part of ultimate aims.

On the other hand, the exponents of the opposing school of thought seem to resent most of the mechanization and centralization of the modern world. This group is much impressed by the additional distribution costs that come with specialization and concentration of production. Whether it is for this economic reason, which contains a degree of truth, or whether it is because of a dislike for the more glaring aspects of modernity, those of this opinion advocate a return to the subsistence practices that were common before the industrial revolution destroyed the earlier individual self-sufficiency.

The difficulty in accepting either line of thought is the way it wholly excludes the other. Both lines of thought conform better to the rigidities of logic than to the variety of fact. Highly systematized social philosophies generally fail because they have a kind of geometrically perfect logic that assumes order and rationality within the social universe that seems to have no real existence outside the minds of those who create such systems.

It must be freely admitted that specialization, centralization, and interdependency seems to be the irresistible trend within industry. This trend does not seem by any means to be entirely spent. We must assume therefore that the industrial circumstances of modern society will continue indefinitely to necessitate a large degree of commercial agricultural production to supply raw materials for industry and to feed the industrial and metropolitan population. Since we are not headed for a return to handicrafts in industry, we must keep a large commercial agricultural plant that includes a great deal of specialized production for the urban market. But this does not mean that all agriculture can or should be established on an industrial basis. It is perfectly possible to have a specialized, highly interdependent, and even collectivized organization of industry and have beside it an agriculture that is in a large measure organized on a pattern of small individual units. Perfect conformity in ideas and organization does not need to extend from the factory into the field.

In agriculture, modern technology does not involve advantage to large units either universally or to the same degree as in industry. Specialized, large-scale agricultural production has sometimes appeared to be efficient when it really was not. It has sometimes created this appearance of efficiency by the device of shifting production costs to other agencies and institutions. It has utilized farm labor for short periods of the year at relatively low wages by shifting the living costs of that labor to relief or to charity during the seasons when it was not wanted. It has on occasion reduced the production costs of some individuals by dispossessing others and by increasing the proportion of individuals within the submerged social strata who live on the precarious border line of economic slavery and deprivation.



Much agriculture that is thoroughly commercial and highly specialized has been prodigal with the soil. Single cropping of various kinds has mined the soils and prepared them for rapid erosion. Concentration or production within specialized areas has increased the threat of diseases and insects and necessitated expensive operations for their control. It has run up the fertilizer bill and, by piling on transportation and handling charges, has increased those costs of distribution which have worried so many when they consider the difference between the price paid to the farmer and the price paid by the ultimate consumer.

Thus, while we may admit that commercial and specialized production is necessary and that on the whole it has provided great benefits, we must appreciate that its costs have not always been fully counted and that in many cases the social costs exceed the gain. We should not, therefore, make an all-embracing doctrine of it, but rather be prepared to let individual circumstances determine the nature of policies to be applied in specific cases.

According to every economic theory that has any prestige to back it, the surplus of population that is in excess of the number required to produce most efficiently the goods that agriculture ordinarily supplies should be diverted into other occupations. This is a point upon which classical economists and Marxists are in perfect agreement.

But it is in fact the very condition of underemployment in industry that is partly or largely the cause of overpopulation in rural areas. The customary outlet for the excess rural population has been very much restricted. Industry has for a long time been unable to provide employment even for those who are dependent wholly upon it and not at all upon agriculture. To add to this number of unemployment all those from agriculture who are surplus by present commercial standards would be to aggravate an industrial unemployment situation that is already in many respects almost intolerable. Industry cannot be expected voluntarily to provide employment opportunities in the near future sufficient to take care of the surplus rural population. To force industry to take this surplus into decent and permanent employment would involve coercive measures that few if any people are prepared to accept. Regardless, therefore, of what pure theory might consider to be the most perfect solution of the problem, agriculture itself must provide a livelihood for a larger number of people than sheer production efficiency requires. In view of the fact that we have a national agricultural plant geared to produce more than the market will profitably pay for and since even with the best control measures we are still precariously near overproduction for the market, the only practical and expedient measure in many cases by which rural living standards can be raised is through the increase of subsistence practices.

Some people seem to imagine that an increase of self-sufficiency is a return to the Middle Ages. Perhaps that is because they have complete faith in the universal application of the theory of comparative

advantage. Perhaps they like the quality of bigness and the outward appearance of rationalized system that characterize many aspects of modern economic organization. Or perhaps they do not know all the facts about twentieth-century methods of subsistence. Perhaps they are inclined to think of modern agriculture exclusively in terms of the most prosperous big farmers and to forget that a great deal of the specialized commercial production where self-sufficiency is lowest is pursued by means of relatively primitive technology under conditions of great poverty. Commercialization of agriculture, specialization in agriculture, and lack of self-sufficiency do not correlate very well with high living standards. Some of the very lowest rural living standards occur in areas of the most highly commercialized and specialized production. This is true in many of the cotton and tobacco regions of the South and in the truck and fruit areas of the South and of the Pacific coast. When we think of farm people we have to give a place to small farmers and tenants, share-croppers, hired hands, and migratory workers along with big operators and proprietors.

For vast numbers of farm people that no other practical plan takes into consideration, small proprietorship with self-sufficient practices could produce a much higher standard of living than is now their lot. A change to self-sufficient agriculture would in these cases constitute material progress rather than retrogression. There is nothing medieval or retrogressive about a family supplying its own food from its own acres by means of progeny-tested hens, blooded sires, hybrid corn, pressure cookers, glass jars, electric refrigeration, and quick freezing. Yet it is precisely by such applications of modern technology that subsistence practices can be most effective. There are hundreds of thousands of farm families who produce practically nothing but a single crop of which there is such a market surplus that the price is too low to provide them with cash to buy the things they need. Yet they remain dependent upon the precarious and insufficient cash income from their one market crop to supply many things they could produce themselves with little or no out-of-pocket costs. Diversity of production to include a supply of their own consuming needs would in the first place reduce the need for cash outlay and in the second place tend to decrease the surplus which stands in the way of a good price for the crops that are sold.

A cash income for subsistence groups would continue to be necessary - a cash income sometimes greater than is now received. This would undoubtedly require a greater total cash income for agriculture as a whole than it now receives. But there is no cheaper way of taking good care of our disadvantaged rural people than by lowering the cash cost of a decent secure living.¹ To the degree that an increased cash income cannot be realized for agriculture by increased urban consumption of farm products, we should resort to a frank and open subsidy for as long a period as economic inequality exists. For the alternative to subsidy is peonage and the development of a proletarian group on a scale that is dangerously incompatible with the ideals of opportunity and democracy upon which our most cherished national institutions are based.

Self-sufficiency farming, however, cannot be instantaneously embarked upon by those who have never practiced it. Self-sufficient farming practices are in the first place impossible in tens of thousands of cases unless tenure arrangements as they now stand are considerably changed. Many sharecroppers could not employ self-sufficient practices even if they would. Many who have the economic opportunity to do so cannot because they simply do not know how. In any case a change of farming practices from one or two cash crops to a rounded, live-at-home economy involves vastly more than the mere physical change of planting six crops instead of one or two and tending a score of animals instead of a lone mule. It means new foods to get used to. It means new kinds of concerns, new kinds of practices, and new kinds of knowledge. It means new kinds of pleasures and satisfactions to supplant older ones, and new ideas about life's basic values. And it means almost certainly that there must be a greater extension of cooperative activity. For in this modern world of technology, the humble little man can retain his independence generally only through devices of cooperative effort and action that will reduce his disadvantage in competing with vast organizations".

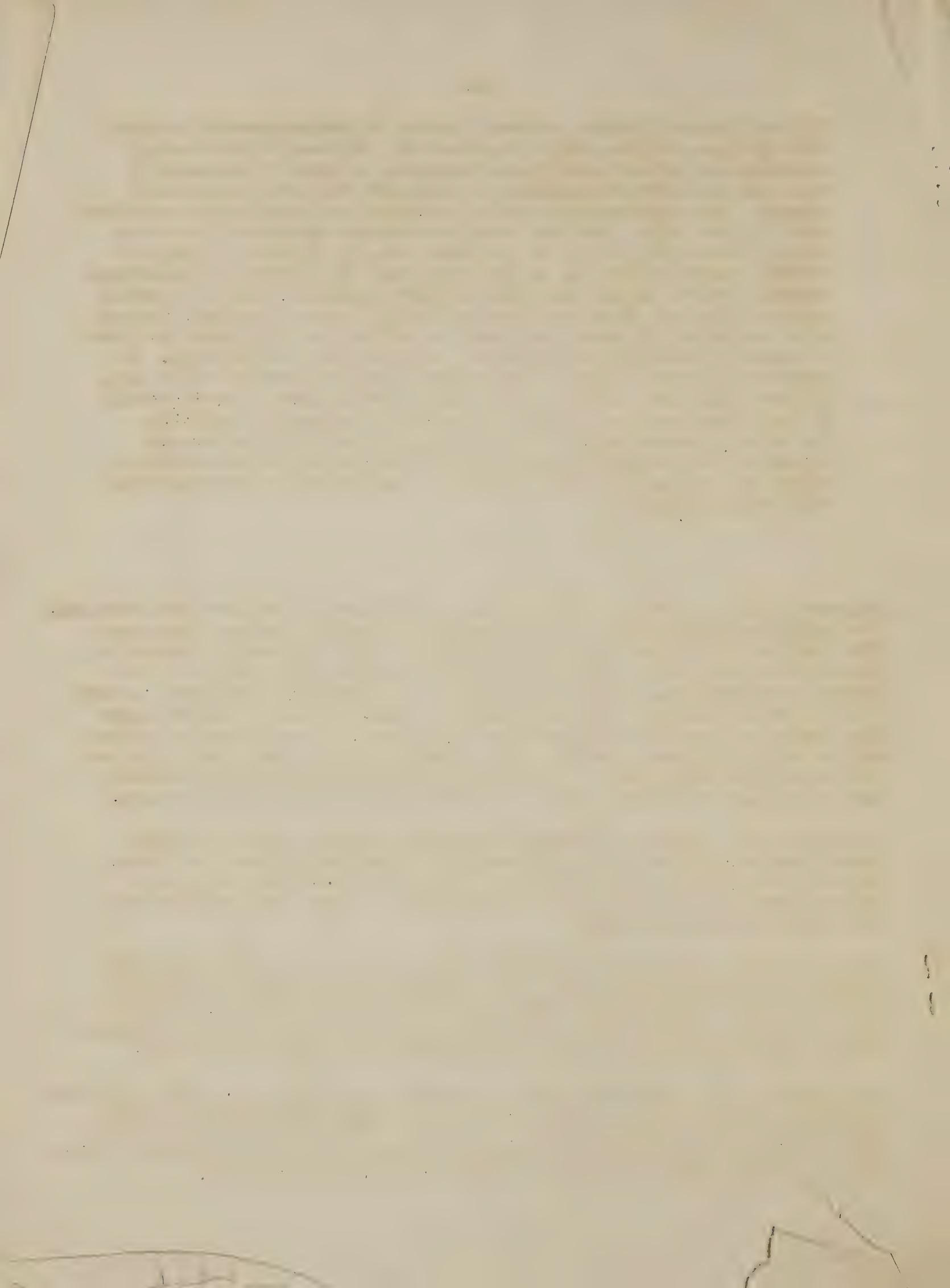
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In recent years the tempo of the dynamics of Southern agriculture has increased. The factors promoting changes in our economic structure are more severe now than they ever have been since the liberation. There are social changes in progress now which will have a vital effect upon the future status of our people in agriculture. This is in contrast to periods in which there is very little change and change that is gradual and slow. In such a period people find their position in society more or less secure. The position of a group may be low as to tenure, housing, diet, economic status, etc., but it is for the period relatively secure. The whole institutional system has reached a sort of balance providing a place and stable relationships for all groups.

It is when this balance is seriously disturbed that the institutionalism breaks down and various class, interest and occupational groups are thrown in severe competition with each other. Under such conditions any disadvantaged group is likely to find it difficult to compete successfully with other more advantaged groups.

In the dynamics of Southern Agriculture the Negro is a disadvantaged group. Differentials in political status, in education and educational facilities and his almost total exclusion from the controlling economic institutions places him in a serious competitive position. With freedom from the suppressions of the plantation has come also insecurity in a competitive world.

The leadership of Negro farmers has a Herculean task before it. From this group assembled here will come a significant group of our leaders in Southeastern Agriculture of the immediate future. We are so few and our task is so great that we cannot afford not to be together on fundamentals and objectives. It is hoped that this conference will be a step in the right direction.



RELIEF SITUATION FOR NEGRO HOUSEHOLDS IN
SELECTED CITIES, 1934

(From: Urban Workers on Relief, W. P. A., Research Mono. No. IV)

Cities	'Percent of Negro Households on Re- lief*	'Percent of Relief Households Negro	'Percent of all Households Negro**
Atlanta	49.1	61.5	34.6
Birmingham	37.2	62.1	41.1
Chicago	51.1	22.9	6.5
Detroit	30.9	25.2	6.9
New York	52.1	14.8	4.5
St. Louis	53.9	40.8	11.0
Washington	59.4	73.2	23.9

* Calculated from W. P. A. figures

** Based on 1930 census

PERCENT NEGROES ARE OF EACH GROUP IN THE LABOR FORCE OF SEVEN CITIES
(From Preliminary Figures, U. S. Census of 1940)

Cities	Employed Non-Emergency	Employed Public Emergency	Seeking Work
Atlanta	35.2	41.5	49.4
Birmingham	39.3	51.7	60.0
Chicago	5.9	33.8	13.4
Detroit	7.3	38.1	14.3
New York	6.3	19.3	9.0
St. Louis	10.5	39.1	21.4
Washington	26.2	65.4	45.8
Average Percent	18.7	41.3	30.5

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